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Thomas Jackson

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Characters as Archetypes in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

THOMAS JACKSON



IT IS REPORTED THAT IN 1862, when Harriet Beecher Stowe met President Lincoln in the White House, he remarked, “So you are the little lady that wrote the book that started this Great War.” (Reynolds) Whether this exchange actually happened or not is irrelevant; what is true is the anti-slavery, bestselling book *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did indeed have a place in the list of causes of the American Civil War. It was immediately embraced by the abolitionist north and reviled by the pro-slavery south. As this timeless book is translated to a twenty-first century audience, it is obvious that Stowe has created characters that have taken on different or even iconic connotations, others that miss the mark as archetypes in their didactic nature, and scenes that have become the standard image for particular stereotypes throughout American history .

Today when someone is called an “Uncle Tom,” it is a hateful comment generally from one black person to another, insinuating that the person is somehow complacent, suppliant toward the white race. Though Tom was a genial, obedient slave in Stowe's book, his was the strongest moral character in the story:

No, I mean, really, Tom is a good, steady, sensible, pious fellow. He got religion. At a camp meeting, four years ago; and I believe he really did get it. I've trusted him, since then, with everything I have, - money, house, horses, - and let him come and go round the country; and I have always found him true and square in everything. (Stowe 1701-1702)

This was Haley, Tom's current owner from Kentucky, describing Tom to Mr. Shelby, a slave trader. Haley really believed in the goodness of his slave Tom, a fact accepted by Mr. Shelby, as long as the qualifier that Tom was honest - for a slave - was added. Tom's passivity was not due to an acceptance of being inferior, but instead to his profound faith in the Christian religion. He believed in the goodness of God and that all things were by His will. He believed that he must love all and endure life's trials, and that God would see him through.

As a Christ-figure archetype, Tom transcends the simple meaning of the book to become an allegorical Christian hero. His piety shows that no matter what trouble the world shoves at him, he will remain faithful:

...No, no Missis! I've lost everything, -wife, children, home, and kind master, -and he would have set me free if he'd only lived a week longer; I've lost everything in this world, and it's clean gone forever, -and now I Can't lose Heaven, too; no, I can't get to be wicked, besides all. (Stowe 1782)

Ah, the biblical Job is seen here in Tom's lamentations. Tom shows here how his faith in the Lord is uppermost in his life. Raised in a Calvinist household by her influential father, Stowe's religious values are reflected in Tom's undying faith, even in the face of great tragedy and adversity. The scene involving Tom's death and the conversion to Christ of the slaves Sambo and Quimbo is reminiscent of Jesus on the cross with the two thieves:

Tom says, "Poor critters!...I'd be willing to bar' all I have, if it'll only bring ye to Christ! O, Lord! Give me these two more souls, I pray." (Stowe Kindle)

Stowe's purpose in the character of Tom is to be Christ-like in his actions and beliefs, not to show him as a helpless supplicant, which is implied by the modern archetype. One can see Pontius Pilot in the actions of Simon Legree; the similarities between these characters and the Biblical telling of the crucifixion are striking. The allusion is complete, and this delineates the never-ending struggle of good versus evil, and good's inevitable victory with one's acceptance of Christ.

Though "Uncle Tom" is the most ubiquitous reference to this novel in the modern world, Stowe's minor characters make their impact as well. As antithesis to the goodness of Tom, Simon Legree is the hateful, evil, white slave master from the Deep South. It is interesting that Stowe seems to differentiate between the whites in the Deep South and those from the Upper South. Her characters in Kentucky, even though they do own slaves, are portrayed as benevolent, kind, and even loving masters, whereas Mr. Legree from Louisiana, associated with the violence and cruelty of the Deep South, is the epitome of evil:

"I hate him!" said Legree, that night, as he sat up in his bed; "I hate him! And isn't he mine? Can't I do what I like with him? Who's to hinder, I wonder?" And Legree clenched his fist, and shook it, as if he had something in his hands that he could rend in pieces. (Stowe 1788)

With this rant, Simon Legree has decided to kill the slave Tom. He tells the world that this slave, this man, this human being, belongs to him and he can do whatever he wants to do with his property. This is a very powerful condemnation of slavery as it exposes slavery's inherent contradiction to humanity. The essence of the book resides in these few lines. In today's vernacular, the name Simon Legree has

become a euphemism for evil, specifically when it comes to the inhumane treatment of one's fellow man, a reference that is appropriate when considering the actions and attitudes of Stowe's character.

"Come here Jim Crow," said he [Shelby]. The child came up, and the master patted the curly head and chucked him under the chin. (Stowe 1702)

"Jim Crow" was the iconic pet name Mr. Shelby gave to Harry, the young son of the slave Eliza. He called him this when he wanted the boy to perform for him. Harry would dance and sing and do imitations - anything to please his master. After the War Between the States, the white southerners enacted what were called Black Codes. These were laws that set expectations as to how Blacks should behave in their everyday lives so as to not offend their white superiors - again, anything to please the "masters." These laws were instituted to control the newly freed African American slaves. They became known throughout history as "Jim Crow laws," because of their connection to Stowe's character, another lasting legacy of the novel.

Along with the iconic, archetypal characters in her book, Stowe also creates memorable characters that attempt to teach moral lessons. For example, in Evangeline St. Claire, known as Eva, the small white girl that Tom meets on his way down south to be sold, Stowe has created an almost holy character. Eva is small, always dressed in white, and is the angelic little daughter of Augustine St. Claire (Stowe 1753). Eva is portrayed as the perfect child: a completely moral, Christian, little girl. She does not see any difference in blacks and whites and does not feel slavery is right. In fact, **"Often and often she walked mournfully round the place where Haley's gang of men and women sat in their chains. She would glide in among them, and look at them with an air of perplexed and sorrowful earnestness; and sometimes she would lift their chains with her slender hands, and then sigh woefully, as she glided away." (Stowe 1754)**, showing an almost saintly disdain and concern with the way these slaves were treated. When asked by her father why she wanted him to buy Tom, she replied **"I want to make him [Tom] happy." (Stowe 1756)**, a selfless act in a world that treats these humans as chattel.

Alas, Eva falls ill, and her death bed scene is troubling. Eva asks all the slaves to gather around her, and she gives each a lock of her hair and begs them to be Christian, so they will all meet again in heaven. Stowe has given this five year old girl a force of will beyond her young age. This death bed sermon from little Eva is powerful and emotional, but also just slightly unbelievable. The scene is too obvious in its similarity to the Last Supper with Jesus and His disciples, a completely inappropriate comparison because of the vast differences in the contexts. Eva is a five year old little girl on her death bed; she is not giving her life to atone for the sins of humanity. She is an insightful young lady with a kind heart who believes that slavery is wrong. She is not the savior of any group of people, in bondage or not.

Stowe, in her zeal, diminished Eva's impact in trying to bestow this type of sainthood on her. A young girl might have mature insight and a generous, caring heart, but she does not possess the power or maturity to understand the complexities of slavery and its associated consequences. Thus this character, though one to model, does not become a cultural icon.

Lastly, Stowe creates scenes in her novel that have become archetypal standards in later literature and film. Picture the scene: a silent movie, grainy film, organ music playing dolefully in the theater. On the screen our heroine, usually a pretty, slender white girl, is being chased by either bad men with evil intent, dogs slathering to rend her arms from her body, or Indians on the war path. She comes to the river and her only hope of escape is to jump among the ice floes that are cascading downstream rocking and rolling away. Bravely she makes the attempt and either is successful, to prove that women are brave and powerful, or falls and is pulled from the soup by a masculine hero. **"It was now early spring, and the river was swollen and turbulent; great cakes of floating ice were swinging heavily to and fro in the turbid waters."** (Stowe Kindle); this scene, taken directly from Stowe's book of the escape of Eliza and her son Harry, is the stereotypical adventure of the damsel in distress. Eliza's experience has been translated into thousands of other stories, with different character names and contexts, but the adventure is the same; a helpless girl needing to save herself or be saved, to prove herself worthy of respect and admiration or to reinforce the idea that she is weak and needs a male protector. The story is the same since Stowe created it so many years ago.

Uncle Tom's Cabin is an important book for many reasons. It was considered by many to be the spark that ignited a national tragedy, but it is more than just that incendiary trigger. It is also a timeless piece of classic literature that transformed society with its ideas and iconic characters and transcended its time to teach lessons that changed a nation's way of thinking in its most tumultuous era. Stowe created characters that started a political firestorm in nineteenth century America and that have retained their relevancy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Good will always face evil; evil will always present itself as a formidable force; and, with faith and strength, good will always win. Stowe understood this and used these concepts not only to fight for the end of slavery, but also to transform the hearts and minds of white America.

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